

Schaefer assails Dixon as 2-1 balance shifts on Board of Public Works

**Comptroller annoyed
with treasurer, blames
pressure from Assembly**

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Comptroller William Donald Schaefer lashed out publicly at Treasurer Richard N. Dixon yesterday; accusing him of becoming a rubber stamp for Gov. Parris N. Glendening on the powerful Board of Public Works.

Schaefer's outburst at yesterday's board meeting signals an apparent end to what Annapolis observers have described as "an unholy alliance" of the two officials in opposition to Glendening.

"The treasurer now is the second vote for the governor," Schaefer said after the meeting. "All of a sudden, anything the governor says is OK."

The comptroller, treasurer and governor are the three members of the board, which reviews all major state contracts and many spending decisions. Since Schaefer's election in 1998, he and Dixon have from time to time joined forces to block Glendening decisions.

But yesterday, after Dixon sat mute while Schaefer raised complaint after complaint about Glendening administration actions, the comptroller launched into a public denunciation of the treasurer.

In the acid tones Schaefer usually reserves for Glendening and the governor's underlings, the comptroller mocked Dixon's policy of refusing to second-guess decisions of the General Assembly, which elects the treasurer.

"You're telling me that just because the General Assembly approves it, it's all right?" demanded Schaefer, who was questioning the long-standing practice of letting the recipients of state loans and grants select their own contractors without formal bidding.

Dixon defended the practice as a "local prerogative" endorsed by the General Assembly in many bond bills.

Schaefer recalled that he had joined Dixon, a former Carroll County delegate, in opposing the governor's decision to cancel a bypass project in Manchester.

"You've given up?" Schaefer taunted. "I'm not going to just cave in because the governor waves his hands and everybody caves in."

"I haven't given up, but [the governor] makes the final decision," Dixon replied.

During the exchange, Glendening sat impassively between the two officials — showing little reaction to Schaefer's criticisms over matters great and small.

The comptroller's exchange with Dixon capped a 2½-hour meeting at which Schaefer repeatedly questioned even minuscule government contracts, frequently implying that the bidding had been rigged.

After the meeting, Dixon played down the clash, saying "I'm not aware of any falling out" with Schaefer. But the comptroller continued to fume, lamenting that Dixon had stopped being an independent voice after a meeting with General Assembly leaders.

Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller confirmed that he and House Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr. had met with Dixon earlier this summer to discuss his handling of the treasurer's job.

"We stressed to him that government was a team effort," Miller said. The Senate leader said Assembly leaders reminded the conservative Dixon that he was elected by a Democratic legislature with more liberal views.

Miller denied there had been any "arm-twisting" of Dixon. "Nobody expects him to be a toady or lackey for anybody," he said.

"I think former Governor Schaefer tends to be frustrated by the fact he is no longer governor of the state of Maryland and he is one of only three votes on the Board of Public Works," Miller said.